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# What you should know about alcohol and substance abuse while working remotely



## *Since the beginning of lockdown, most employers have adopted remote working policies.*

With the ‘silly season’ approaching, employees may be tempted to have a drink while *working remotely*, but are there any consequences if they have a drink at home while performing their duties?

In this blog, we aim to address alcohol and substance abuse in the workplace in line with the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

## What is a ‘workplace’ as per the Occupational Health and Safety Act?

The *Occupational Health and Safety* Act defines a workplace as *any premises or place where a person performs work in the course of his employment.*

- This includes a remote location from which an employee works, but is not limited to the employee's home residence, office or movable workstation. Taking this into consideration, employees should bear in mind that company policies and procedures, including the disciplinary code, are applicable whilst working, even when working remotely.
- Recent surveys show that 32% of Americans are likely to drink during work hours while working remotely. Employers should therefore review their policies to make sure that they have an alcohol and substance abuse policy in place, and that these policies include clear definitions, and make provision, amongst others, for remote working.
- Although it might not be easily identifiable, if there is any suspicion that an employee is drinking or using any other substance while performing their duties, they may face disciplinary action, which could result in dismissal. Therefore, it is important that employees are made aware of such policies, as well as the disciplinary actions that may be taken against them should they be in breach of such policies.

## What are the obvious behaviours that may indicate alcohol or substance abuse?

Managers and co-workers will be the first to notice out of the ordinary or indifferent behaviour should a team member use alcohol or other substances while working remotely. The most noticeable behaviours indicating alcohol and substance abuse while working remotely may include the following:

- Missed meetings or often being late for meetings
- Slurred or incoherent speech during online meetings or telephone calls
- Changes in behaviour
- Untidy appearance, including poor hygiene that is visible on video
- Disengagement from meetings.

Managers and co-workers can identify these behaviours early on if they schedule frequent meetings with teams and enforce 'video on' meetings.

Taking the stress factor associated with Covid-19 and remote working into consideration, employers should be sensitive towards employees and *bear in mind that employees may suffer from more stressors than usual.* Stressors that contribute to alcohol and substance abuse as a result of Covid-19 and working remotely include the following:

- Isolation from people
- Work/life balance, including playing more than one role (teacher, parent and professional)
- Fear of becoming ill
- Extra workload or working longer hours than usual, or not having enough work to do.

We recommend that all employers assess their policies and amend them to reflect the intention of an ‘Alcohol and Drug Policy’ and the employer’s true needs. Our experienced labour relations consultants deal comprehensively with the relevant labour legislation on your behalf and will gladly assist employers with the drafting, amendment and implementation of their policies, for example an 'Alcohol and Drug Policy'.

If you missed our previous blog on '*Essentials of alcohol and drug policy in the workplace*', take a look at the difference between a field sobriety and breathalyser test.

***About the Author:*** Dina Korsten joined SERR Synergy in February 2020 as the HR Manager. She graduated from the University of Pretoria in 2011 with a BCom in Human Resources and in 2018 completed her BCom (Honours) in Industrial and Organisational Psychology.

**Sources:**

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